DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 297 229 CG 021 003

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TITLE Individual and Situational Factors in Adolescent Coping.
PUB DATE Apr 87
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Baltimore, MD, April 23-26, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; *Coping; Depression (Psychology); *Dropouts; *Early Parenthood; Family Relationship; Females; *Mothers; Secondary Education; Secondary School Students; Self Esteem; Social Support Groups; Stress Variables

ABSTRACT

Recent research has emphasized the need to identify the effectiveness of various coping strategies and social supports used by adolescent mothers. This study examined how adolescents cope with life stresses in nine problem areas. Participants were adolescent mothers who returned to school after the birth of their baby (N=40), adolescent mothers who dropped out of school (N=35), and female dropouts who were not mothers (N=20). Participants ranged in age from 15 to 19; all mothers had a child under 3 years of age. Data were obtained by means of a structured interview in the adolescents' homes. In addition to demographics, data were obtained on problems in life conditions, coping responses, social support, and depression. Analyses focused on individual and situational determinants of coping responses and on the effectiveness of responses in specific situations. The results showed that mothering dropouts were more depressed than nonmothering dropouts, and were less satisfied with their level of education than were mothers who had returned to school. Nonmothering dropouts had significantly higher levels of family stress than did mothering dropouts. In general, the effectiveness of coping strategies varied from situation to situation, with the adolescents' coping strategies appearing to be most effective in relieving stress in intimate relationships and with educational problems. (NB)

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Individual and Situational Factors in Adolescent Coping

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CG 021003

Paper presented at the Society for Research in Child Development Biennial Meeting April, 1987.

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine how adolescents cope with life stresses in nine problem areas. Analyses focused on individual and situational determinants of coping responses and on the effectiveness of responses in specific situations.

Three groups of adolescents were participants in the study: adolescent mothers who returned to school after the birth of their baby (N=40), adolescent mothers who dropped out of school (N=35); and dropouts who were not mothers (N=20). Adolescent mothers were selected from birth records and teen dropouts from school records of rural county located on the outskirts of Washington, D.C. The 95 participants ranged in age from 15 to 19; all mothers had a child under three years of age. Data were obtained by means of a structured interview in the teens' homes. In addition to demographics, data were obtained on: (1) problems in life conditions; (2) coping responses; (3) social support; and (4) depression. Mothering dropouts were more depressed than nonmothering dropouts, and were less satisfied with their level of education than mothers who had returned to school. Nonmothering dropouts had significantly higher levels of family stress than mothering dropouts. In general, the effectiveness of coping strategies varied from situation to situation, the adolescents' coping strategies were most effective in relieving stress in intimate relationships and with educational problems.

Individual and Situational Factors in Adolescent Coping

Statement of the Problem

Recent research has emphasized the need to identify the effectiveness of various coping strategies and social supports used by adolescent mothers (Colletta, 1983). In addition, it is important to determine how individual factors such as educational status are related to coping patterns. Previous studies have followed the adolescent through pregnancy and into the early postnatal period, but there is a need to assess the adolescent's functioning as she faces the stresses of mothering a toddler and guiding her child through his first struggle for independence. To achieve a clearer understanding of the relationships among early motherhood, educational status, and coping adolescents varying in their maternal status (mothering, nonmothering), and education were studied by examining the stresses of mothering a toddler in relation to the stresses of adolescents who are not mothers. An emphasis was placed on individual and situational differences in coping responses and on the effectiveness of responses in specific situations.

Coping may be categorized according to function: direct action responses designed to change the situation or responses designed to redefine or change the meaning to reduce the threat (Pearlin, et al., 1981). To this we would add: 1) responses designed to avoid the problem; 2) and those responses characterized by seeking assistance from others.

Any methodologically adequate study of variations in coping responses must consider if the impact of individual styles of coping across situations as well as the situational demands that relate to choice of response. Pearlin and his colleagues (1981) theorize that coping

responses are not a function of personality dispositions but a function of the problems faced in specific role areas. When investigators have assessed individuals' coping response across situations, they have discovered a degree of variability from situation to situation. For example, Folkman and Lazarus (1980) asked their subjects to report problem and emotion focused coping responses over a nine-month period. While there was some degree of individual consistency across episodes, a greater amount of variability was accounted for by the situation themselves, with health problems eliciting more emotion focused coping and work situations calling forth more problem-focused coping. Fleishman (1984) concluded that across parental, work and marital role areas, selective ignoring and other forms of emotion-focused coping are associated, while problem-focused coping and advice seeking are less consistently used across settings. From this and other research (Pearlin and Schooler, 1978; Sidel, Moos, Adams and Caddy, 1969; Richert and Kettering, 1978) it appears that some of the variance in coping responses may be accounted for by situational factors and suggests that to predict choice of coping a combination of situational and individual characteristics should be included.

One important set of characteristics are the personal resources individuals have available to them. Personal resources, such as self-esteem and sense of control, not only help individuals maintain their equilibrium in stressful situations, but may help them evaluate potentially traumatic events as a chance for personal growth (Moos and Billings, 1982). These general dispositions may also lead individuals to prefer certain coping responses and which may lead to specific individual response styles (Fleishman, 1984).

Sense of control is the individual's belief that life events are susceptable to their influence or change efforts. It is logical to assume that individuals with a strong feeling of being able to control their environment would be more likely to actively choose from an array of coping responses thereby increasing their likelihood of a successful choice and reducing stress levels. The findings on this point are mixed; two studies have reported that control reduces the effects of stress (Johnson and Sasason, 1978; Pearlin and Schooler, 1978) while an equal number of studies report no relationship (Sandler and Lakey, 1982; Wheaton, 1982). A recent study which specifically considered the control-coping connection reported weak and situation specific relationships (Fleishman, 1984). Control was related to instrumental coping in the impersonal areas of work and finances but was unrelated to coping with interpersonal problems.

The trait of self-esteem, the positiveness of the self-evaluation (Rosenberg, 1965), may also be related to coping responses in problem situations. It may be argued that the individual high in feelings of esteem will feel challenged rather than overwhelmed by problems; an orientation that would lead to active coping attempts rather than passive acceptance or avoidance of the situation. A number of studies have reported that high esteem is related to choice of more effective coping responses (Hamburg and Adams, 1967; Kohasa, 1979). However, high esteem has also been related to repression (Zanna and Olson, 1982) suggesting that esteem may be maintained by ignoring problems that are threatening to the self-concept. If such a relationship holds, esteem may be related to coping styles of avoidance or redefinition of the problem.

A recent study (Fleishman, 1984) has supported the relationship

between esteem and active coping, reporting that high self-esteem is related to an active problem solving approach to coping, particularly in taking direct action at work and negotiating in marriage. While the study seems to support a relationship between self-esteem and active coping, the relationships were weak and need to be verified by additional research.

It has been argued (Pearlin, et al., 1981) that stress may be conceptualized as both a global response that remains constant across situations and as a situational trait. A global response is more likely when problems are so overwhelming that problems in one area wash over, or affect, many role areas. Depression is one such global indicator which is precipitated by an accumulation of stresses including loss of close interpersonal relationships, unemployment and poverty (Pearlin and Johnson, 1977; Weissman and Paykel, 1974). In addition, high rates of depression are found among mothers who are single or who have very young children (Belle, 1982; Radloff, 1977). The fact that these risk factors converge in the lives of adolescent mothers make a measure of depression especially well suited for use as an index of stress reactions in the current study.

In addition to manifesting itself as a global response, stress may appear in response to the problems faced in a specific situation without having a dramatic impact on other role areas. Thus it would be that problems on the job, with a marriage, or with interpersonal relationships may confine themselves to producing distress in specific situations with little washover into other areas. In the current study both global (depression) and situational assessments of distress were used.

Adolescents may consider parenthood as a threat, a challenge or both. The mothers may be using their resources to simply avert painful

situations and minimize threat to their equilibrium or they may see the situation as a challenge and attempt to go beyond dealing with the situation, working instead towards mastery of their problems. When we look at responses to teenage parenthood we will then find those who are unable to cope, those who cope to the extent that they are able to minimize threat to themselves and their children, and those who are able to rise to the occassion with a high degree of adaptability.

The present study identified the situational stresses and the type of coping strategy used by mothering and nonmothering adolescents when confronted with a variety of everyday stresses. The relation between coping and social support on depression and distress with everyday problems was also assessed.

Procedure

Adolescent mothers were selected from the birth records of a rural county located on the outskirts of Washington, D.C. The nonmothering teen dropouts from the same high schools were also contacted to participate in the study. The 95 participants ranged in age from 15 to 19 years. There were three groups of adolescents: mothers returning after the birth of the baby (N=40); mothers who never returned to school after the birth of the baby (N=35); and non-mothers (N=20) who dropped out of the same high school classes during the same years as the mothers who dropped out and did not complete high school.

Using a chi square analysis there were no significant differences in age or race among the three groups. Comparing the groups of mothers there were no significant between groups in the ages of the child (1-3 years) and number of children (91%, 83% with one child).

There were significant differences in marital status (X^2 [8] =

32.15, $p < .001$). The majority of mothering nondropouts were single (73%) while the mothering dropouts were evenly divided between those married (49%) and those unmarried (49%). There were no significant differences among the three groups in the number of people who live with the teen in the household. All groups had an average of 4 other people in the household. The groups were also comparable in the amount of education they had completed before dropping out of school. A significantly greater proportion of the nonmothering dropouts (40%) had completed job training compared to the mother (X^2 [2] = 6.59, $p < .04$).

Data were obtained by means of a structured interview in the mothers' homes. In addition to demographics, data were obtained on: 1) problems in life conditions; 2) coping responses (Stress and Family Functioning Interview) (Colletta, 1981); 3) social support (Stress and Family Functioning Interview) (Colletta, 1981); and 4) depression (CES-D Scale)(Radloff, 1977).

Results

The young women in the three groups experienced significantly different levels of distress within an intimate relationship (X^2 [20] = 31.5, $p < .05$). The intensity of distress was greater for the mothers (both the dropout and nondropout) than for the nondropout mothers. However, when controlling for support received and coping strategies in a regression analysis these differences were no longer significant. Note to author: report with tables. There were also significant group differences in distress over health (X^2 [12] = 24.3, $p < .05$) with the nondropout mothers reporting proportionally higher levels of health stressors than the other two groups. When controlling for support received and coping strategies in a regression analysis the differences

among the groups disappeared. Separate table. There were also significant differences in the levels of stress within the teen's family ($F[2,94] = 3.33$, $p < .05$). Those who were not mothers and dropped out had significantly higher levels of stress in their families than the dropout mothers even when controlling for coping strategies and social supports received.

Among the three groups, the only significant difference was the level of depressive symptoms. The dropout mothers were significantly more depressed than the dropout nonmothers ($F[2,94] = 4.05$, $p < .03$). (Table 1)

Depression was significantly related to emotional support received ($F[1,83] = 5.60$, $p < .05$) across all problem situations and the type of coping strategy used with educational problems ($F[6,83] = 3.12$, $p = .008$). In post-hoc comparisons, redefining the problem and avoidance were significantly related to higher levels of depression among all teens. Depression was significantly related to financial problems ($F[1,86] = 5.47$, $p = .02$), housing problems ($F[1,84] = 14.13$, $p = .003$), health problems ($F[1,85] = 4.76$, $p = .03$), child problems ($F[1,86] = 4.16$, $p = .04$) problems with lover ($F[1,85] = 9.06$, $p = .003$), problems with friends ($F[1,85] = 14.23$, $p = .0003$) but not relative problems nor problems with work. However, the total support received from family and friends did lessen feelings of distress with family problems ($F[1,94] = 5.55$, $p = .02$) and the total emotional support received was negatively related to the level of depressive symptoms ($F[1,94] = 10.77$, $p = .002$) across all problem situations.

There were significant differences among the three groups in the way they coped with school problems (X^2 [12] = 42.18, $p < .001$) A greater

proportion of nonmothering dropouts took direct action when it involved school problems such as seeing if they could go back to school at least parttime (55% of their coping strategies fell into this category). The nondropout mothers were more likely to seek help with school problems (22%), take direct action to get rid of difficulties (22%), or do something interesting after school to make themselves feel better (13%). The mothers who dropped out were more likely to try to go back to school at least parttime (42%) than try the other possible coping strategies (Table 2).

There were significant differences among the three groups in the way they coped with an intimate relationship (boyfriend or husband). The most prevalent strategy used by the mothering dropouts was to use direct action. The mothering dropouts were more likely to use emotional responses (31%) than the other two groups (15% and 10%) and less likely to seek help (0%) with their problems with an intimate relationship than the nondropout mothers (10%) or the nonmother dropouts (5%).

The coping strategies used by all the adolescents, did not significantly affect distress with problems involving friends, other relatives, the child, their health, or housing and financial problems. However, the choice of coping strategy did make a significant difference in their feelings of distress with an intimate relationship (i.e., boyfriend or husband) and with educational problems. With educational problems direct action or seeking help from others was more effective in alleviating depression while avoiding the problem or redefining it as unimportant were least effective. With problems in intimate relationships those teens who took direct action with the problems in the relationship (i.e., sat down and talked things out) were more effective in reducing

distress in the relationship than those teens who avoided the problem (i.e., kept out of the husband's way). Those who sought to overlook the difficulties and look at the good parts of the relationship were more effective than those who reacted emotionally.

The type of coping strategy used with educational problems differed significantly in affecting the depressive symptoms expressed by the adolescents ($F[2,94] = 3.12$, $p = .008$). Tukey planned comparisons revealed that, regardless of educational status, those adolescents who took direct action or sought help from others with their educational problems were significantly less depressed than those who avoided the problem or redefined it as unimportant. In addition, those adolescents who had developed a supportive network were those who actively sought help from others for their problems compared with those who just told themselves that the problem was unimportant ($F[2,94] = 40.61$, $p = .0001$). Discuss correlations between self esteem, locus of control and coping strategy, Table 3.

Conclusions

Coping strategies varied in their effectiveness in reducing depressive symptoms and reducing distress with particular problems. The coping strategies that were effective in reducing distress with educational problems were not the same coping strategies that are effective in reducing distress with an intimate relationship. These findings imply that those who are actively involved in helping young mothers cope with their problems would do well to help the mothers tailor their responses to the demands presented by their specific life conditions.

TABLE 1

	Mothers Dropout N=35		Mothers Nondropout N=40		Normothers Dropout N=20	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
CES-D	21.7	12.3	18.6	10.5	15.1	10.6
Self Esteem	2.3	1.8	2.2	1.6	1.4	1.6
Locus of Control	9.4	4.6	8.8	8.8	10.0	5.0
Total Support	55.9	16.5	66.6	11.1	34.6	10.6
Emotional Support	63.0	16.4	63.6	14.7	60.6	14.8

TABLE 2
Coping Strategies of Mothers and Nonmothers

	Mothers Dropout N=35		Mothers Nondropout N=40		Nonmothers Dropout N=20	
Coping with Education*	N	%	N	%	N	%
Not applicable	0	0	16	40.5	0	
Emotional	3	8.5	5	12.5	3	15
Redefine	6	17.1	0	0	4	20
Avoid	2	5.7	0	0	0	0
Seek Help	9	25.7	9	22.5	1	5
Direct Action	15	42.8	9	22.5	11	55
Coping with Work						
Emotional	0	0	0	0	1	5
Redefine	8	23	9	23	1	5
Avoid	3	9	1	3	2	10
Seek Help	16	46	17	42	7	35
Direct Action	8	23	13	32	8	40
Missing	0	0	0	0	1	5
Coping with Parents						
Emotional	1	3	2	5	4	20
Redefine	3	8	1	3	0	0
Avoid	5	14	11	27	4	20
Seek Help	4	11	3	7	1	5
Direct Action	22	63	23	58	10	50
Missing	0	0	0	0	1	5

*$p < .001$

TABLE 2 (CONT.)

	Mothers Dropout		Mothers Nondropout		Nonmother Dropout	
	N= 35		N=40		N=20	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Coping with Friends						
Emotional	4	11	0	0	0	0
Redefine	3	8	0	0	3	15
Avoid	2	6	3	8	1	5
Seek Help	4	11	4	10	3	15
Direct Action	22	63	33	83	13	65
Coping with Intimate Relationship*						
Emotional	11	31	6	15	2	10
Redefine	0	0	2	5	6	30
Avoid	4	11	6	15	2	10
Seek Help	0	0	4	10	1	5
Direct Action	20	57	22	55	9	45

*$p < .001$

TABLE 3

Correlations Between Self-Esteem, Locus of Control and Coping Strategy

Active Coping Strategies
N=95

	School	Work	Parents	Friends	Intimate Relationship	Health	Housing	Finance
Self-Esteem	.25**	.46***	.30**	.26**	.17	.04	.11	.12
Locus of Control	.15	.31**	.20*	.22*	.25**	.06	.01	.03

*** p < .001
** p < .01
* p < .05

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